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## Collaboration for change: Exploring effective collaboration between academics and community organisations

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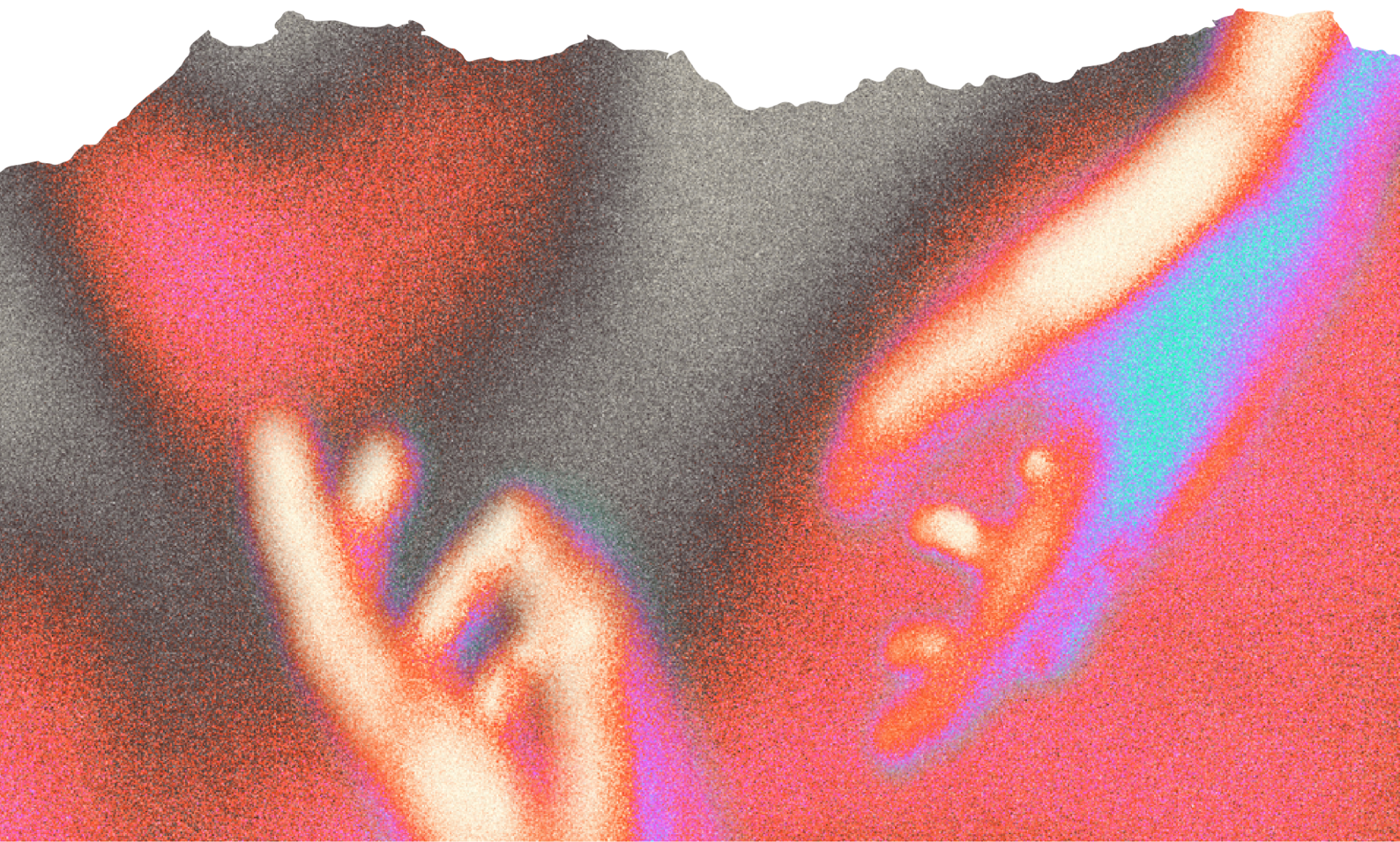


# COLLABORATION FOR CHANGE

## Exploring Effective Collaboration between Academics and Community Organisations

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A partnership between The University of Manchester Dating App Connections team and Black Beetle Health, funded by the SoSS Community Partnership Fund 2022



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# **01. INTRODUCTION**

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This report explores how academics and community organisations may collaborate in research, based on the findings from a workshop organised by Black Beetle Health in collaboration with the University of Manchester School of Social Sciences. This workshop aimed to establish principles for effective collaboration. The collaboration involved three researchers from Sociology, Dr Jaime Garcia-Iglesias, Dr Neta Yodovich, and Professor Brian Heaphy; and Black Beetle Health, a community public health organisation. The report presents key themes, experiences, expectations, benefits, and challenges identified during the workshop, along with principles for cross-engagement.

# 02. BACKGROUND

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The University of Manchester School of Social Sciences initiated the Community Partnership Fund in 2022 to support collaborations between academics and community partners in the North-west of England. It invited academics and community partners to collaborate on projects aligned with the University's social responsibility goals. This report is the product of the funded project titled "Black LGBT+ well-being during and after COVID-19 lockdown." This project was hosted within the ESRC-funded Dating App Connections project.

The project brought together researchers from the University of Manchester and Black Beetle Health, a community public health organisation. Black Beetle Health promotes health, wellbeing and equality for LGBT+ communities of colour by focusing on health disparities. Black Beetle Health emphasises the role of evidence-based initiatives, and its main area of activity is the development of peer-reviewed resources for LGBTQ+ people of colour across the UK and delivering training for healthcare providers. Black Beetle Health is a registered charity that receives support from a variety of sources, including the LGBT+ Futures Grant Programme and The National Lottery.

The collaboration between the Dating App Connections team and Black Beetle Health aimed to enhance research skills among community practitioners and explore the challenges and opportunities of community-based research. Staff members from Black Beetle Health were seconded to the research team, contributing to research activities and receiving training in key research skills.

As a key part of this collaboration, Black Beetle Health and the research team organised a workshop on April 2023 titled "SOSS Community Research Partnership Workshop," and held at in Manchester. The workshop involved representatives from a variety of community organisations in Greater Manchester, such as The Men's Room, and African Rainbow Family. These focused on the process of engaging in research from either perspective and were followed by a series of 'think thank' discussions to identify barriers, benefits, and experiences of collaboration.

This project aligns with the University's commitment to promoting good health, social inclusion, and public and civic engagement. It addresses health challenges, amplifies the voices of marginalised groups, and strengthens the University's connection to the community.

# 03. KEY THEMES

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The workshop participants co-developed key themes to address and consider in effective collaborations.



**3.1 Capacity**



**3.2 Remuneration**



**3.3 Empowerment**



**3.4 Upskilling**



**3.5 Mutual growth (benefit)**



**3.6 Transparency and trust**



**3.7 Stakeholders**



## 3.1 CAPACITY

Capacity refers to the ability of both community organisations and researchers to collaborate effectively. It encompasses factors such as time, staff availability, and resources. Some of the workshop attendees highlighted how community organisations often work on a project basis and may struggle to accommodate unplanned projects or demands given their limited capacity. At the same time, researchers should ensure that they have the capacity to undertake research projects responsibly. Building and strengthening capacity on both sides is essential for successful collaborations. One organisation who works with people experiencing multiple vulnerabilities commented how they received so many collaboration requests from researchers that they were struggling to answer them, so they had to develop a template response.

**Recommendation:** Engage in conversations about expectations for capacity as early as possible.



### **3.2 REMUNERATION**

Remuneration emphasises the importance of adequate and timely compensation for all partners for their time and work invested in the collaboration. It recognises that the contributions of both community organisations and researchers are valuable and should be appropriately recognised. These include lived experience expertise, emotional labour in supporting or recruiting participants, or providing expertise. Ensuring fair compensation can enhance the motivation and commitment of all parties involved. Some organisations commented how engaging or supporting research projects involved providing “after-care” for participants which was not adequately funded by the research.

**Recommendation: Adequately cost the time, expertise, and resources provided by community partners. Ensure that mechanisms are available for their financial needs to be met promptly.**



### **3.3 EMPOWERMENT**

Empowerment involves utilising research projects to generate positive change within communities. It recognises the potential of research to empower community members, organisations, and researchers themselves. By actively involving communities in the research process and considering their needs and perspectives, collaborations can facilitate empowerment and promote sustainable outcomes. For example, an organisation working with LGBT+ Black communities explained how being involved in research gave them the skills to understand their impact and work and, in turn, empowered them to advocate for their service users to local authorities and policy makers.

**Recommendation: Involve community partners in all research stages, including design and funding applications.**





### **3.4 UPSKILLING**

Upskilling focuses on supporting the professional development and capability of community members and organisations through research collaborations. It involves providing opportunities for skill-building, knowledge sharing, and learning. By equipping community members with research skills and expertise, collaborations can empower them to actively contribute to the research process and enhance their own capacity for future endeavours.

**Recommendation:** See research collaborations as opportunities to share knowledge and skills, for example in publishing or grant capture.



### **3.5 MUTUAL GROWTH (BENEFIT)**

The principle of mutual growth highlights the idea that research collaborations should generate tangible and practical benefits for all stakeholders involved. It goes beyond individual gains and emphasises the importance of collective growth. Collaborations should strive to create shared value, providing benefits not only to researchers but also to community organisations, community members, funders, and other stakeholders. One of the partners suggested that reports, evaluations, and impact statements that community organisations could use to secure additional funding would be beneficial for them.

**Recommendation:** Identify clear benefits for all stakeholders and seek to fulfil them during the project.



### **3.6 TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST**

Transparency promotes open and accountable practices within research collaborations, building trust. It involves clear and honest communication between all parties, ensuring that expectations, processes, and outcomes are clearly defined and understood.

Transparency also includes openly addressing power dynamics, acknowledging the interests and motivations of each party involved, and fostering an environment of trust and collaboration. A community organisation supporting sex workers explained how it was often difficult to ascertain a researcher's motivation to undertake a project without wider context, such as the researcher's career stage, funding expectations, or publishing goals. Without these, it was difficult for them to feel they could 'trust' the researcher to engage with their service users. Similarly, most participants agreed that community organisations often are not familiar with research funding processes and would appreciate clear information about applications, timelines, or requirements.

**Recommendation: Be open and honest about the vision and mission of the project, including the goals of the researchers (e.g. career development) and the process.**



### **3.7 STAKEHOLDERS**

Stakeholders encompass all individuals or groups with an interest in, or potential to benefit from, the research collaboration. This includes community members, community organisations, researchers, universities, funders, and others. Recognising and involving stakeholders throughout the research process helps ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, fostering a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to collaboration. Most of the organisations at the workshop complained that they were often not consulted before ethical approval was sought, leading to inadequate research methods or approaches that were hard to modify.

**Recommendation: Engage with stakeholders early and honestly, and support cross-connections between different groups, fostering networking.**

By addressing these key themes in collaborations between academics and community organisations, stakeholders can establish a strong foundation for successful and impactful partnerships.

# 04. EXPERIENCES, EXPECTATIONS, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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## 4.1

### EXPERIENCES

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Workshop participants reflected on their past experiences with community-based research. They expressed concerns about a poor understanding of research context, communication challenges with researchers, and an overly cautious approach in asking questions. The participants emphasised the importance of effective communication and a shared understanding of research lifecycles, goals, and aims, between researchers and community members. For example, a community organisation recalled a positive experience where the researchers they were collaborating with took the time to explain the different stages of the research, how they were intending to publish the results, and how long this might take.

**Recommendation:** Provide adequate framework and background knowledge for community partners to make informed decisions, including information on funding, academic environments, or research excellence.

# 4.2

## EXPECTATIONS

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Participants shared their expectations of community-based research. Some participants recalled how they were often asked to carry out time-consuming tasks without acknowledging how these may be a burden to their everyday work. A community leader commented that, on one occasion, they were left to provide support for participants after they had taken part in a research project without the researchers covering these costs. Others also raised concerns about how anonymity in outputs may preclude proper credit for participating organisations. Transparency and a legitimate research approach were among the common expectations of workshop participants.

**Recommendation: Discuss with community partners what outputs are better, and talk about how their input may be acknowledged.**

# 4.3

## BENEFITS

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The participants discussed the benefits of community-based research. They highlighted the potential for research to be exploratory work, identifying new or future funding needs, knowledge sharing between researchers and communities, networking opportunities, and the chance to highlight and support community organisations. Community-focused research was seen as a platform for exchange and allyship.

One participant, who works for a small organisation supporting homeless people, explained how collaborating with research allowed them to have evidence to support their claims when applying for funding from local authorities.



# 4.4

## CHALLENGES

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The challenges associated with community-based research were identified by participants. These challenges included increased stress and emotional labour (such as recruiting or supporting participants), the fact that outputs may not be accessible for their communities (for example, papers behind paywalls), capacity issues within organisations, and unexpected priorities.

For example, workshop attendees pointed out that, for organisations that usually work on a project basis, it could be difficult to take on new projects or tasks at short notice. They explained that researchers should take this into account, adapting their timelines to community organisations' operations.

**Recommendation: Maintain an open dialogue with community partners that allows for ongoing adaptation and accountability.**

# 05. DEVELOPING PRINCIPLES FOR CROSS-ENGAGEMENT



The workshop participants co-developed key themes to address and consider in effective collaborations.



**5.1 Co-production**



**5.4 Accessibility**



**5.2 Mutual benefit**



**5.5 Cultural appropriateness**



**5.3 Transparency**



## 5.1 CO-PRODUCTION

Participants emphasised the importance of co-production in community-based research. They suggested that co-production should be clear from the outset of the research initiative, involving collaboration with research participants or communities throughout the research lifecycle. Robustness in handling collected information and clarity about next steps after the research completion were also highlighted.



## 5.2 MUTUAL BENEFIT

Ensuring that all parties gain something from the research was seen as crucial. Benefits from research collaboration could include monetary compensation, capacity building, upskilling opportunities, fundraising support, and public recognition.



### **5.3 TRANSPARENCY AND TRUST**

Transparency was identified as a key principle for effective collaboration. It involves providing opportunities for community input and clarifying who will benefit from the research and how. Clear communication of the research process and protocols was emphasised. Understanding power dynamics was also considered important to ensure the motivations behind the research were well understood.

Trust was also considered of key importance. Researchers and community organisations should use transparency to build trust, and maintain it through clear, and open communication.



### **5.4 ACCESSIBILITY**

The principle of accessibility highlighted the need to consider the context of the community and participants involved in the research. This includes considerations related to gender, age, and any protected characteristics. Accessibility measures should address barriers to engagement and participation. Additionally, researchers should ensure that research findings are easily accessible, understandable, and shareable within the community.



### **5.5 CULTURAL APPROPRIATENESS**

Cultural appropriateness is an essential aspect of community-based research. Researchers should demonstrate open-mindedness, emotional intelligence, and sensitivity to maximise research effectiveness and minimise harm. An intersectional approach and inclusivity were emphasised to ensure the research considers diverse cultural perspectives.

# CONCLUSION

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Collaboration between academics and community organisations can be facilitated through the principles of co-production, mutual benefit, transparency, accessibility, and cultural appropriateness. Understanding the experiences, expectations, benefits, and challenges of research is crucial for building successful collaborations. By adopting these principles, academics and community organisations can establish meaningful partnerships.



**Collaboration for Change**

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